Linguistic Differences and Learning to Read for Nonmainstream Dialect Speakers

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In relation to Mainstream American English (MAE), nonmainstream dialects of English are characterized by differences in phonology, morphology, syntax, vocabulary, and prosody (Wolfram & Schilling, 2016). Nonmainstream American English (NMAE) refers to a variety of dialects including African American English, Appalachian English, Caribbean English Creoles, Chicano/Latino English, Hawaiian Creole English, and Southern American English. NMAE is spoken by children and adults in various regions of the U.S. across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds. However, dialect density, the rate of dialect produced in spoken language, is highest among Black children, the majority of whom are African American (AA), and/or from low income homes (e.g., Washington & Craig, 1998). Largely fueled by achievement gaps in reading between AA students and students from lower SES backgrounds and their White, higher income peers (McFarland et al., 2019), recent research has addressed differences between NMAE and MAE in relation to language and reading outcomes among children. This research demonstrates that in general, children who use a high frequency of NMAE dialect tend to have lower literacy scores than their peers who use no or very little NMAE dialect (see Gatlin & Wanzek, 2015 for a review).

If we consider how economic disadvantage and NMAE each influence growth of literacy, SES is closely related to vocabulary, background knowledge, and overall language comprehension (e.g., Pace et al., 2017), whereas NMAE is more closely tied to structural aspects of language (phonology, morphology, and syntax). Thus, the combined impact of SES and NMAE will contribute to children's development of reading as oral language skills form foundations upon which literacy skills develop. The study of NMAE has traditionally focused on word- and sentence-level differences, commonly referred to as morphosyntactic—a combination of morphological and syntactic—dialect features. For example, the MAE phrase *We went to Sam's house* may be stated as *We went to Sam house* in NMAE dialect. *They were hungry* in MAE may be stated as *They was hungry* in NMAE. This research, largely conducted in the field of communication disorders, has targeted morphosyntactic features for two reasons primarily: 1) to identify developmental profiles of language within the context of dialect and SES differences and 2) to evidence similarities and differences among clinical indicators of language impairment for NMAE and MAE speakers (who traditionally have been the target sample in much of the existing research; Oetting & McDonald, 2001). Recently, however, the focus of research has been dedicated to understanding phonological differences of NMAE and associations with general language skills and reading outcomes.

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Connections Between Learning to Read and NMAE Use

Three major theories have been proposed regarding relations between NMAE use and reading acquisition, mainly focusing on explanations of reading difficulties. The first is the linguistic bias hypothesis, which suggests that teachers perceive students who use NMAE as less capable than their peers who do not use NMAE (Goodman & Buck, 1973). Teachers' preconceived notions towards NMAE, and in particular, lower prestige dialects such as African American English (AAE), may lead to setting lower expectations for academic success. This bias, which potentially occurs regardless of teacher race (Gupta, 2010), may then result in lower expectations regarding academic performance, resulting in fewer opportunities for successful learning. The second theory suggests that there is a mismatch between the structures of NMAE and MAE, which leads to an increased difficulty in learning to read (Cecil, 1988). The structural differences of NMAE and the texts used in classrooms often do not align. This theory is supported by studies that have found negative associations between NMAE usage and literacy skills (e.g., Craig & Washington, 2004).

The third theory on the relation between NMAE and difficulties in learning to read is the linguistic flexibility hypothesis (Terry & Scarborough, 2011). This theory suggests that NMAE speakers who have strong metalinguistic awareness are able to switch between NMAE and MAE easily. Metalinguistic awareness is the ability to decontextualize language by thinking, manipulating, and talking about it. Children with limited linguistic flexibility may have difficulty switching between NMAE and MAE. Importantly, this theory posits that dialect use alone is not predictive of literacy skills. Rather, the ability to dialect

Abbreviations

AA: African American
AAE: African American English
MAE: Mainstream American English
NMAE: Nonmainstream American English
SES: Socioeconomic status

shift in various contexts that presuppose MAE use, such as speaking in formal settings or when writing, is indicative of metalinguistic awareness, which is in turn related to reading outcomes. This theory also proposes that the relation between dialect, language, and reading is complex, with bidirectional relationships among the factors. Whether one predicts the other is important, but it is imperative to consider the challenges that children who speak with dialects may face when learning to read, specifically in the areas of oral language and phonological skills.

Malcolm: Linguistic Barriers in the Classroom

Envision the following scenario in a first-grade classroom during Language Arts instruction. Just over 20 students are in their orange seats in groups of four with their individual desks touching one another, making a larger square-shaped formation of desks. During whole group instruction, the teacher walks around the classroom, priming the children for background knowledge before reading a story. In doing so, she asks a general question to the class. An AA male student, Malcolm, who is seated at a desk by himself in the corner, enthusiastically raises his hand to answer the question:

Teacher: *Who knows what the word 'strain' means?*
Malcolm: *Ooh, ooh me, I know.*
Teacher: *Go ahead.*
Malcolm: *It's like a rope except smaller.*
Teacher (with a puzzled look): *No, that's not it. Does anyone else think they know the answer?*

The teacher calls on another student who raises her hand. That student gives a close definition of *strain*, making a hand gesture signifying a squeezing motion. The teacher then praises the second student for her attempt, gives the definition of the word, and then uses *strain* in a sentence. Malcolm begins playing with pencils inside of his desk as the teacher begins reading the story.

Oral language is often conceptualized as vocabulary knowledge, but a more comprehensive and accurate view includes phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, listening comprehension, and narrative skills.

Two common phonological dialect features of both AAE and Southern American English are 'g' dropping (e.g., *runnin'*) and vowel shifting (e.g., *think* becomes *thank*). In this particular instance, Malcolm likely misunderstood the teacher and perceived the word *strain* as *string*. If this was indeed the case in this particular instance, Malcolm gave an accurate description according to his own conceptualization of the word *string*, demonstrating how he might pronounce the word using his own dialect ("I tied my *shoestrain*"). Thus for Malcolm, the words *strain* and *string* are presumably indistinguishable.

Imagine this or similar situations occurring daily for students like Malcolm whose dialect may be significantly different from that of their teachers. Further imagine the cumulative consequences of such events for students for whom these types of interactions are regular occurrences. This particular sequence of events did in fact take place in a classroom in the southeastern portion of the U.S. and was captured as part of a research project involving video observations of first-grade instructional practices.

NMAE Dialect, Oral Language, and Phonological Awareness

Tremendous effort has gone into identifying the components of reading skills in order to inform instruction. For example, the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986), which posits that reading comprehension consists of two separate but equally important parts (decoding and linguistic comprehension), has guided research and practice for several years. More recently, the Componential Model of Reading (Aaron et al., 2008) was developed to account for the elements of the Simple View of Reading (the *cognitive domain*) and the *psychological* and *ecological domains*, which are also important for reading development. Linguistic skills are an integral component of any model of reading development, and research has demonstrated the importance of language in the acquisition of reading skills (e.g., Dickinson et al., 2012). Oral language is often conceptualized as vocabulary knowledge, but a more comprehensive and accurate view includes phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, listening comprehension, and narrative skills (Language and Reading Research Consortium, 2015).

Phonological awareness is the knowledge that spoken language consists of smaller units (Wagner & Torgesen, 1987), including rhymes, syllables, and individual sounds (phonemes). The ability to focus on and manipulate phonemes in spoken words is referred to as phonemic awareness. Children whose first language is English and who are learning to read the English Writing System are tasked with discriminating individual sounds in words, many of which are already a part of their vocabulary. For a child whose first language is English, but uses a nonmainstream dialect of English, identifying and manipulating individual phonemes in words may be more difficult. For instance, a common phonological feature of AAE is the reduction of final consonant clusters. A child may be shown a picture of a "hand" and asked to segment the sounds of the word. That child may respond /h/ /a/ /n/ because in the child's dialect, the final sound /d/ is variably produced. In fact, researchers have found that there is a tendency for children who use a greater amount of dialect in their speech to have lower scores on standardized measures of phonological awareness (e.g., Mitri & Terry, 2014).

Phonemic awareness is a prerequisite for letter-sound identification and decoding skills (e.g., Liberman, 1973). In transparent orthographies (e.g., Spanish), sounds and letters map onto one another with nearly a one-to-one correspondence. In more opaque orthographies (e.g., English), correspondence between sounds and letters is not always consistent. Thus, for

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children who speak English and are learning to read words in English, mapping sounds and letters may already be a challenge. For NMAE dialect speakers, learning the alphabetic principle, the notion that written symbols or graphemes (letters) represent phonemes that signal the pronunciation of words, is perhaps even more challenging. Often, NMAE dialect differences do not map well onto the English Writing System's orthography (Wolfram & Schilling, 2016). For instance, in AAE, /f/ and /v/ are often used in the place of the /th/ sound in words ending in -th (e.g., the word *smooth* is pronounced as *smoov*). Thus, when children encounter written words such as *bath*, they may not realize that the graphemes blend together to refer to a concept with which they are familiar, they just pronounce it differently—*baf*. Charity and colleagues (2004) found that for dialect speakers, greater use of phonological features of MAE, and by implication increased knowledge of MAE, on a sentence imitation task was positively associated with decoding and word identification.

Once word reading skills are mastered, higher order language skills are essential for reading comprehension (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). For NMAE dialect speakers, differences in morphology and syntax, coupled with phonological differences, could make comprehension more difficult. As an example, two common features of both AAE and Southern American English are variance in subject-verb agreement and the zero modal auxiliary (the deletion of helping verbs such as *has* and *have*) as demonstrated in the sentence, *Zion need to change clothes because he been outside*. In this one sentence, the variation from MAE may not appear extreme. However, when multiple sentences become paragraphs and paragraphs become full text, then dialect differences could potentially have an impact on the comprehension of the text. Moreover, for children who speak with a dialect, who are more likely to come from low SES backgrounds, deficits in vocabulary and background knowledge likely exacerbate the differences. Strong decoding skills, in the absence of sufficient vocabulary and background knowledge, will yield difficulties with reading comprehension (Gough & Tunmer, 1986).

Componential Model of Reading

In the Componential Model of Reading (Aaron et al., 2008), ecological and psychological domains are important to children's reading outcomes, in addition to the cognitive domains focusing on decoding and linguistic comprehension. The ecological domain includes factors such as NMAE dialect differences, the home environment, the class environment, parental involvement, and peer influences. An important consideration of the ecological domain is the linguistic diversity that students bring with them to school that is reflective of the language of their home and neighborhood environments. Dialects that are deemed as informal are often referred to as "home language." MAE is usually considered more formal and is typically referred to as standard, academic, or "school language." Although several aspects of the ecological domain are beyond the control of educational agencies, being aware of these factors that potentially play a role in the development of reading is important in the consideration of assessment and instruction of children who are at risk of reading difficulties, particularly children from traditionally marginalized backgrounds.

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The psychological domain of the Componential Model of Reading consists of teacher knowledge and expectations, and student motivation. Knowledge of the language constructs necessary for teaching literacy skills is very important (e.g., Moats, 2009), but unfortunately, teachers may not always receive sufficient training in this area. Without explicit knowledge and training, teachers may lack understanding of NMAE dialects and the potential role of dialect in the acquisition of reading skills. As we saw in the aforementioned classroom scenario, the teacher appeared unaware of dialectal differences that were likely responsible for Malcolm's misinterpretation of the word *strain*. If she had been familiar with phonological features of dialect, she might surmise that he had interpreted the word as *string* and actually gave an accurate (and clever) response, and thus would have been able to acknowledge Malcolm's attempt and address his misunderstanding. The observer is also left to ponder the roles of teacher expectations in relation to the use of NMAE and student motivation in the exchange. It is plausible that this interaction had a negative effect on Malcolm's motivation and desire to engage. He resorted to off-task behavior after his answer was not recognized. The seemingly well-intended teacher may have simply lacked knowledge of dialect differences, resulting in a missed learning opportunity for Malcolm.

Implications and Future Directions

As previously stated, prior research has generally found negative relations between dialect use and language and reading skills. However, the nature of the relationship is not entirely clear. That is, research has not determined whether NMAE dialect use itself is a cause of reading difficulties or if ability or inability to vary dialect use is instead an indicator, or marker, of overall language and reading skills. As the linguistic flexibility hypothesis suggests, using a nonmainstream dialect is not necessarily a risk factor for children who are learning to read. In fact, varying dialect use in different contexts may actually signal strong language skills among children (Connor & Craig,

2006). The relationship between NMAE dialect and literacy is even more ambiguous when studied among children from low-income homes because of potential confounding of dialect and language and literacy skills with SES. Therefore, without longitudinal evidence and intervention research examining dialect use and phonological awareness, language, and reading outcomes among children in various SES contexts, causal relations cannot be determined. More research is needed in the area in order to garner more conclusive results.

The linguistic differences that children bring with them to school should be viewed positively in classrooms and used as strengths to leverage performance in literacy. Many speakers of NMAE are able to speak more than one dialect of English. The metalinguistic awareness required to vary dialect use in different contexts or environments can be used as a strength in regard to reading instruction, similar to the way that bilingualism is often viewed as a language strength (Terry et al., 2018). We recommend that teachers talk explicitly with students about how most of us speak differently depending upon the context (e.g., home language versus school language) and with whom we are speaking. Doing so, in a positive light without criticism or invalidation of the students' home language, we believe, will help to decrease the stigmas often associated with being a speaker of NMAE. Programs like *DAWS* (Johnson et al., 2017), *ToggleTalk* (Craig, 2018), and *Codeswitching Lessons* (Wheeler & Swords, 2010) focus on helping students become what is referred to as bidialectal (Wolfram & Schilling, 2016), by explicitly contrasting MAE and AAE (see Table 1 for more information on these programs and Figure 1 for sample *DAWS* lessons). Adding contrastive analysis to existing evidence-based language and literacy programs is one potentially effective approach to instruction among dialect speakers (Gatlin-Nash & Terry, in press; Washington et al., 2018).

In addition to speakers of dialects receiving instruction and intervention, teachers should also receive professional development geared toward increasing their knowledge of the structures of dialects and the potential role of linguistic differences in learning to read. As part of their preparation and development, teachers usually receive training focused on best practices for students who are English learners. However, they are typically unaware of language structures of NMAE (Diehm & Hendricks, in press; Gupta, 2010). Equipped with knowledge of dialect and the features that might be evident in children's language, educators can assist children by explicitly addressing potential sources of confusion when error patterns emerge in literacy instruction. For instance, dialect variation should be taken into consideration for instruction and assessment in phonemic awareness (e.g., *hand* as /h/ /a/ /n/). Additionally, by carefully analyzing dialect speakers' written language, educators can gauge the role that NMAE may play in students' understanding of the alphabetic principle. For example, if a student repeatedly misspells words with /th/ digraphs (e.g., *them* as *dem*, *with* as *wif*), that student may not be attending to differences in the pronunciation of /th/ in MAE and in his or her dialect. Similarly, knowledge of word and sentence level differences is important for teachers as several dialect features are traditionally criticized and/or marked as grammatical errors. For instance, common NMAE dialectal features include the absence of the past tense marker *-ed* (e.g., *The boy jump around his room yesterday*.) and the absence of the plural marker *-s* (e.g., *The candy costs 50 cent*.). When occurrences such as these happen, explicit instruction that still respects the child's home language can draw students' attention to the differences between informal dialect and more standard or mainstream forms of English.

Finally, standardized measures of language skills often assess students' knowledge of MAE and may not accurately assess the language abilities of students who speak NMAE. For instance, traditional measures of phonological awareness tap into children's knowledge of MAE phonology, and it is important to note that NMAE dialects speakers do not necessarily lack phonological knowledge. Indeed, Terry (2014) found that NMAE speakers demonstrated phonological knowledge of NMAE as evidenced by their performance on a phonological judgment task. Children were asked to judge pronunciations of words, some of which were consistent with NMAE dialect patterns (e.g., *breakfast* in MAE realized as *breakfas'* or *breffis* in NMAE). Both the low and high frequency dialect groups judged MAE pronunciations as acceptable. However, children in the high dialect group, who used dialect frequently in their speech, were more likely to judge NMAE dialect pronunciations as acceptable than their peers who used NMAE infrequently in their speech (i.e., the low dialect group). These findings underscore that NMAE dialect speakers have phonological knowledge in their primary dialect as well as MAE. From a strengths-based perspective, it is important to recognize that typically developing children who speak NMAE often have a strong grasp of their primary dialect; however, our assessment approaches and the reasons for which we often embark upon assessment do not always allow for this fact to be realized. In addition, oral narrative skills are often a linguistic strength for AA children (Gardner-Neblett et al., 2012), potentially stemming from cultural practices of storytelling to enrich

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TABLE 1. Programs Available to Encourage Bidialectism

Program	Website	Grade Level
DAWS	*https://www.ventrislearning.com/dialect-awareness-daws/*	Grades 2–4
ToggleTalk	*https://www.ventrislearning.com/toggletalk/*	Grades K–1
Codeswitching Lessons	*https://www.ventrislearning.com/code-switching-lessons/*	Grades 2–6

Week 1: Day 1

TEACHER INSTRUCTIONS

Objectives:
To contrast home and school language and to learn about using past tense and plurals.

Materials needed:
- Pictures of formal and informal clothing
- *Don't Say Ain't* by Irene Smalls

Teacher:
Clothing can be divided into two categories, formal and informal. What do you think is the difference between formal and informal clothing? Can you think of some times where you would wear formal clothing? How about when you would wear informal or casual clothing?

Scaffolding tip:
If students are having difficulty, ask them to think about different places they go where they have to wear specific clothes (i.e. church, playing with friends).

Teacher:
I'm going to show you several different pictures. Think about whether they are wearing formal or informal clothing.

Present pictures.

Just like there are different times when we have to wear different types of clothing, there are also times when we have to use different types of language. We all speak differently at home than we do at school. So you can think of how you talk at home as your "informal clothing," while how you talk at school is your "formal clothing." There's nothing wrong with the way you talk at home, there is just a different expectation for what is appropriate when you come to school. When you come to talk to me, we are going to talk about the differences between home and school language and when they should be used.

This week we are going to talk about two grammatical features that we should use all the time in our school language. We do not always use these in our home language. The first feature is using *plurals. Plural* is a concept of quality, representing "more than one." In English, the *plural* is typically formed by adding –s or –es to the end of a word. For example, "There are three kids sitting at the table." In school language, we have to add -s to *kid* because it shows that there is more than one.

The other feature we will also talk about using in school language is *past tense.* This is a verb tense that expresses an action that has happened in the past. Verbs are usually made *past tense* by adding –d or –ed to the end of a word. For example, "I walked home from school yesterday." What word gives us a clue that this was done in the past? (Scaffold if necessary.) The word *yesterday* gives us a clue that this is something that was done in the past. We have to add –ed to *walk* to make it *past tense.* When we have a *past tense* sentence we also have to be sure to include the correct linking verb. "Was" and "were" should be used in sentences that are *past tense* because they represent an action that has already occurred.

Teacher:
Now I'm going to show you a book where the characters use both home and school language to help you tell the difference between the two. The book is called *Don't Say Ain't.* It is a story about a little girl who is trying to fit in at a new school because she talks differently, but also does not want to lose her friends back home.

Read pages with sticky notes attached. Ask students whether each passage is in home or school language. Draw their attention to home language appearing in quotations.

Figure 1. Sample DAWS Lessons on Discussing Language Differences and Teaching Contrastive Analysis
Note: From Ventris Learning Dialect Awareness (DAWS™). Printed with permission from publisher.

Week 2: Day 1

TEACHER INSTRUCTIONS

Objectives:
To contrast home and school language and to understand subject–verb agreement and the copula.

Materials needed:
- Copula Sentence Sorts

Teacher:

Let's review the differences between home and school language again. What do you remember about each? In which types of situations is home language appropriate? How about school language?

This week we are going to focus on two grammatical features that we should use all the time in our school language: the *copula* and *subject-verb agreement.* We do not always use these in our home language.

Teacher:

The *copula* is a verb, but it does not express action. The *copula* is the word that serves as a connecting link between the subject of the verb and additional information about the subject. Some forms of the *copula* that we use often include: *is, are, was, were,* and *am.* For example, "Pam is a doctor." Who is the subject of this sentence? Which form of the *copula* did you hear that connected the subject to the word "doctor?"

The other feature we will talk about this week is closely related to the *copula. Subject-verb agreement* occurs when the subject and verb of a sentence agree in number. Singular subjects need singular verbs while plural subjects need plural verbs. What is the subject in the sentence "My sisters are teachers"? What form of the *copula* is used as a verb to link the subject to the word "teacher"? *Are* and *were* are used if the subject is plural, as with this example. *Is, was,* and *am* are used if the subject is singular. Can someone come up with a sentence that has a singular subject and uses *is* or *was?*

Teacher:

For our activity today, we are going to focus on the copula. I am going to give each of you a pile of cards. Separate them into two stacks based on the pattern you see.

Pass out Sentence Sorts and give students time to complete the activity.

Scaffolding tips:

- If students are having difficulty, tell them to separate the cards into school language and home language. If still struggling, allow students to work together.
- Remind students that sentences that include "was" or "were" are past tense and the action verb should have –d or –ed at the end in school language.

Teacher:

What pattern did you find in your two stacks? You should have one group of cards that is in home language and another group that is in school language. In the school language stack, a *copula* was used in each sentence. Which words are used as a form of the *copula*?

Go over each sentence to ensure that students understand the rule and have them in the accurate pile.

Now I would like for you to rewrite the sentences from the home language pile into school language using the Writing Sheet in your folder.

Ask students to place the Writing Sheet at the back of their folder after they are finished.

interpersonal interactions. Unfortunately, however, standard assessment and instructional practices often result in children's linguistic strengths being overlooked.

Dialects of English are complex and rule-governed systems of English, no different than MAE, and they need not be perceived as a cause of reading difficulties or a weakness among students.

Appreciating Linguistic Diversity

Perhaps now more than ever, reading is considered a foundational skill. It opens the doors to opportunities for competing in an increasingly technologically advanced and global world. Unlike reading, language develops in context through implicit adult-child interactions with very little direct support. Development of reading, on the other hand, requires explicit, systematic instruction and without it, children will not learn to read proficiently. Learning to read for NMAE dialect speakers can be an arduous task, especially in the face of insufficient general oral language skills. Dialects of English are complex and rule-governed systems of English, no different than MAE, and they need not be perceived as a cause of reading difficulties or a weakness among students. Indeed some of the greatest authors of recent times, such as Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston, used NMAE dialect as a literary device in their poetry and novels. By appreciating and leveraging the unique linguistic characteristics present in NMAE speakers and providing high-quality language and literacy instruction, we hope to see gains in the literacy outcomes of linguistically diverse children.

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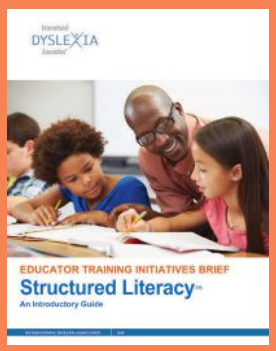

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